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SCIENCE

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THE INTERPRETATION OF NATURE AND
THE TEACHING LABORATORY¹

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There is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted.—David Hume, 1817.

I

IN all ages human conduct has been largely determined by contemporary opinion, and contemporary opinion by current interpretations of nature. When, for example, the Greeks held that the sun was a god, driving a chariot of fire daily across the sky, it was natural for them to worship and revere the sun as the great giver of light and life. For us moderns, holding, as we do, that the sun is a flaming globe of gas, to do likewise is impossible. Savages, believing that disease is due to demoniacal possession, naturally employ charms for prevention and incantations for cure, while we, holding as we do, that typhoid fever comes only by microbes discharged by antecedent cases of that disease, invoke for prevention disinfection of excreta and protective inoculation, and for cure reinforcement of the vital resistance of the patient. In all cases conduct is determined, consciously or unconsciously, by contemporary interpretations of nature, and we shall find it instructive as well as helpful to review briefly some of those accepted interpretations of the past which for longer or shorter times have occupied the minds of men.

And first we must touch upon those savage and barbarous interpretations character-

MSS. intended for publication and books, etc., intended for review should be sent to Professor J. McKeen Cattell, Garrison-Hudson, N. Y.

¹ An address at Bates College on the dedication of the Carnegie Laboratories of Physics and Biology, January 14, 1913.